

Conditioning Your Driving Horse

By: Patty Carley & Judith Orr-Bertelsen Red Deer, Alberta (Chinook Chapter)



Photo courtesy Rich Kylo Photography

Whether we are driving for pleasure around our own fields, or competing at a high level in combined driving, we must consider the fitness of our equine partners. Driving places different physical demands on our horses than riding, and as good horsepeople, we should prepare our horses to meet those demands without causing undue stress or injury.

Judith Orr-Bertelsen competes her Haflinger at intermediate level combined events, and if you have watched her on marathon day, you know how fit her horses are. She has a lifetime of experience keeping horses sound for competition. Here she shares with us some of her ideas on conditioning for driving:

1. Set Your Goals

You will need to know what your end goal is. For example, you want to enter your large pony in a Horse Driving Trial at Training Level. You'll need to know the speed and distance you'll be expected to travel at the competition...in this case the Marathon is 7km and you'll be expected to travel at 12km/h.

2. Know Your Horse's Vital Signs

Pulse: 30-40 bpm (beats per minute) resting and up to 200 bpm in exertion, taken with stethoscope behind elbow, or by feel with the fingers inside the jawl.

Respiration: 8-15 per minute. Watch the sides. Increases with

Normal Vital Signs

Pulse

Resting 30-40 beats per minute

Exertion up to 200 bpm

Respiration

Resting 8-15 breaths per minute.

Temperature

Normal

37.5 - 38.5C (100-101F)

Hydration

Skin Pinch 0-1.5 seconds

Capillary Refill

1-2 seconds

Mucous Membranes

Pink & Moist

For a printable Horse Health Checklist, visit

www.equineguelph.ca/pdf/facts/Health_Check.pdf

For a video on "How To Take Your Horse's Vital Signs, visit

www.thehorse.com/videos/30388/how-to-take-your-horses-vital-signs

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Photo courtesy Patty Carley

Above: A stethoscope, thermometer & lubricant, and antibacterial wipes are must-haves in order to check your horse's vital signs.

exertion, and some horses will even pant, but this should return to normal within 10 min.

Temperature: 100 – 101F (37.5 – 38.5C) rectal. May decrease with training. It is important to take temperature daily, as a higher temperature may indicate the start of an illness or just simply soreness due to overtraining. In any case, 3 days off is good preventive medicine

Dehydration: skinfold test or capillary refill of gum tissue.

Get to know your horses' legs well by checking them daily, both legs simultaneously. You are much more likely to notice a change/heat/swelling if you are checking daily. Watch also for your horses' reaction to your touch as it may indicate soreness.

Taste your horse's sweat: it will be saltier when they are unfit and less salty as they gain fitness.

3. Long Slow Miles Are The First Step

For training level, start at least 8 weeks ahead of your goal (12 weeks for higher levels). In this example, your horse will probably be starting out in cold weather, with a substantial coat. Judy does a trace clip at the start, to



Photo courtesy Patty Carley

Above: A pulse can be taken with a stethoscope behind the horse's elbow.

Below: Be sure your horse is comfortable with you handling his tail before attempting to take his temperature

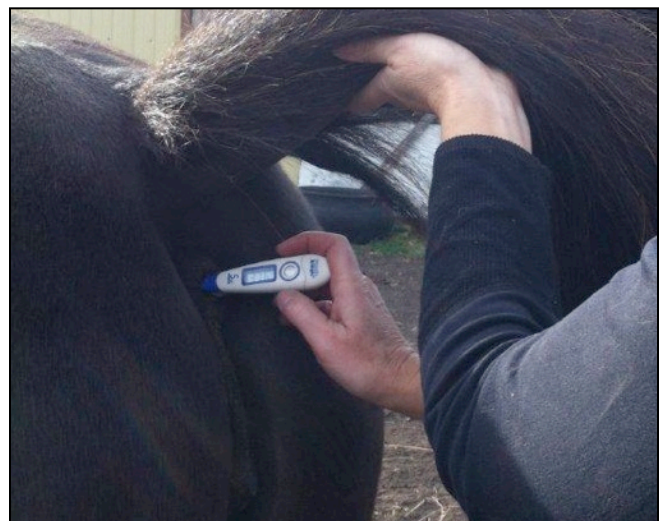


Photo courtesy Patty Carley

remove excess hair under the neck, belly and partway up the sides to make drying and cooling out easier. Of course, the horse will then have to be blanketed for turnout.

Week 1: walk 3 miles, 4 times a week minimum. Some trot at the end of the week. These are the long slow miles that are so important to start with, for horses that have been out at pasture for a period.

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Week 2: trot 3 miles, always with a ½ mile warmup walk and a ½ mile cool-down walk.

Week 3-4: gradually adding on, with dressage work added in.

After 1 month: should be up to 5 miles.

After 6-8 weeks: add on a hill workout or two every week to increase intensity. Add weight to your cart gradually to simulate the extra weight of your groom, plus a little extra (it makes it seem easier to the horse come competition time, if they are used to pulling a bit extra ... plus it may happen that your groom has put on a little weight!

Taper your workouts before your competition for a week or so. This is where you back off on the workload to allow your horse to fully recover and be ready for the intensity of the competition. It is very dependent on your horse's personality, and will take practice to determine what the right plan is. You may find that your horse is too fresh if given too easy a taper into a competition, so be prepared to try different programs.

4. And Don't Forget Your Own Fitness!

5. Some Additional Points...

- Young horse: fitness development should be more gradual, with workouts only every second day or so.
- Heart Rate Monitors: work, but must be securely attached. Not really necessary for our level of competition.
- Remember: heat, muscle soreness, or increased temperature mean STOP! Rest 3 days and go back to last week's workout.

In summary, your goals define your fitness plan. If your goal is to go out to the mountains with a heavy team and haul your trail wagon 10 miles uphill, then your plan will include more distance and hill work, at a slower speed. If your goal is to complete an 8 km marathon at a

14km per hour pace, then your plan should peak at a slightly higher speed than that, with a bit more weight on your carriage than you'll be carrying with your navigator. And don't forget to factor in the terrain! Some courses are fairly level, while others have quite a bit of elevation gain and loss.

If you start to take conditioning seriously, keep records of your workouts and your horse's vital signs. This can be done with notes on a calendar, or there are apps for smartphones (EquiTrack – Equine Training Assistant is one that looks good) for the techies. Dr. Hilary M. Clayton's excellent book "Conditioning Sport Horses" (ISBN 0-9695720-0-X) has an entire chapter on conditioning for combined driving, as well as a lot more detail on exercise physiology.